

Mary Eileen Boyle, OSU

*Working for Justice and Sustainability
as a Green-business Leader*



Responding to the Needs of the Time

How does one move from being an intermediate teacher to becoming a green business leader and Executive Director of *Esperanza Threads*? It is all part of a faith-based journey of being inspired by others, of learning from others, and of striving to walk with and support those most in need.

Sister Mary Eileen Boyle, OSU, has been and continues on such an inspiring journey!



Paw Kee making a hat of fleece made from post consumer plastic bottles.

Early Years in Schools

Growing up as one of four in an Irish-Catholic family and being taught and influenced by the *Ursuline Sisters of Cleve-*

land, Mary Eileen entered the community after high school.

She earned her undergraduate degree at Ursuline College with post graduate work at Akron University and Kent State. Her Masters in Learning Disabilities and Behavior Disorders is from Cleveland State University.

After teaching intermediate grades in Cleveland for 20 years,

her life began to change when she went to *Fort Belknap Indian Reservation* in Montana and taught at the *St. Paul Mission Grade School*, run by the *Dominican Sisters of Sparkill*, for three years.

Learned Much from Native Americans

Mary Eileen then worked in pastoral care for four years at Sacred Heart Parish, which is part of the Fort Belknap Agency. It is the center for tribal activities, offices (*i.e. chairman, vice council*), and government programs, such as health care.

Working with Native Americans had a great pull on her heart. “It is one of those unexplained things,” she remembers. “I learned so much from them” and “probably grew up.” She learned to be a better listener, to realize that no one had all the answers, and to live in “spiritual daily-ness” — which is “part of everything Native Americans” breathe in their being “close to nature.”

Inspired by Dorothy Kazel

A great influence on Mary Eileen was *Dorothy Kazel*. She was a member of the same Cleveland Ursuline community and one of four missionaries killed in El Salvador in 1980.



Burmese women learning to sew on electric machines.

After teaching in the high school attended by Mary Eileen, Dorothy had gone to Sells, Arizona, to teach *Tohono O’odham* aboriginal Americans. Years later, when Mary Eileen attended a Kateri Tekakwitha conference in Arizona, she ended up staying in the same house that Dorothy had helped paint.

Both sisters worked with and learned from Native Americans. Both followed God’s call to reach out to the marginalized. Dorothy was called to Latin America. Mary Eileen was called back to Cleveland.

Esperanza Threads’ Social Justice Focus — “like a vocation”

Following those transformative years with Native Americans and her return to Cleveland, Mary Eileen

responded to a letter from John and Iona Conner, a couple then living in Maryland, who wanted to start a cooperative in the Cleveland area. She then started the democratically operated *Esperanza Threads*, which “was like a

vocation. It was just there.” After a year Esperanza Threads became a separate non-profit from the Grassroots Coalition for Economic and Environmental Justice.

Lack of quality control was a problem when Esperanza Threads started since the women were sewing in their homes. In 2002, the cooperative moved to a building in Bedford, Ohio, owned by the Vincentian Sisters. Soon after this community of sisters merged with the Sisters of Charity (SC) in Cincinnati.

The SCs “helped a lot with the mission,” Mary Eileen recalls, by “giving us a place to expand and become a real business. Then, we were able to purchase new machines and start the Budding Sewing Entrepreneurs Program (BSEP) in low-income areas of Cleveland.” BSEP works with the unemployed and the underemployed, such as recently incarcerated women and political refugees, in order “to teach them a trade and to create green jobs.”

From 2006-2009, a job training program was in the same building. Additionally, Esperanza Threads started teaching in a women’s prison in Cleveland until more space was

needed in 2010. This opened the door for something else: job training with [Catholic Charities Migration and Refugee Services](#), who had started bringing in refugees from [Bhutan](#) and [Burma](#).

Purchasing 100 percent organic cotton, grown and woven in the United States, is another, albeit challenging, aspect of a broad commitment to social justice. This is in concert with providing pesticide-free products and nurturing a healthy world.

Esperanza Threads partners with faith communities and civic groups. Among the benefits of such partnerships are opportunities to educate others about fair wages, the needs of those living on the edges of society, and the necessity of reducing dangerous chemicals in the environment.

Continued Growth on Many Levels

For Mary Eileen, the challenge is learning how to think as a business person. She has “learned a lot in the school of hard knocks and, after 10 years, feels in a position to understand.” Current dreams are to move Esperanza Threads to a larger location in order to be closer to and better serve those most in need by providing industrial level training.

As described in [Green America’s green business interview](#) of Mary Eileen, Esperanza



Paw Thoo learns how to serge a rolled edge for napkins, with Mu Kee and Mary Eileen looking on.



Esperanza Thread’s Mission

A shop, manufacturing natural organic and earth friendly clothing in the USA, whose mission is to provide sewing training in good-quality, green-collar jobs for individuals with barriers to employment.

Threads “exists not only to provide high-quality cotton products at reasonable prices, but also to provide good, green-collar jobs to those who most need them.” One of her greatest joys is seeing job training graduates go on to other good-paying jobs or even to start their own small businesses!

By responding to the needs of the time, Mary Eileen is living her faith and responding to God’s call. May her inspiring journey continue to be blessed and fruitful as she strives to help build a just, sustainable, and peaceful world.



Kler Paw and Pin Aye making fleece hats. Pin Aye is a comedian who keeps everyone laughing.

Photos: courtesy of Esperanza Threads. Used with permission. “Mary Eileen Boyle, OSU” by Mary Pat Hill, OSM.